

MY SAY: Of Peking duck and the burqa

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There will be one favourite delicacy less in Britain soon — the Peking duck! This follows a recent announcement that the dish will be banned throughout the UK. The action was reportedly taken as a result of a European Union (EU) ban on the ovens — a 6ft-high drum-shaped device — traditionally used to prepare it. Said to be larger than a conventional commercial oven, it can roast up to 24 ducks at a time. It is heated by a central burner placed at the base which forced the air up between the skin and the meat, roasting them in the process.

Hardest hit was Chinatown where apparently many ovens were sealed because they did not carry a CE (Conformite Europeenne, or European Compliance) mark; therefore, they did not meet the stipulated safety standards on carbon-monoxide emissions as laid down by Brussels.

But elsewhere in Europe, the ban is yet to be imposed. The British did not take the EU move too kindly. In an editorial, *The Mail* (July 20) said "only the EU could have devised a regulation banning the ovens" and criticised the British "literal-minded bureaucrats" and "inflexible British functionaries" for taking the EU ruling seriously and arriving at "such depths of silliness".

The shutdown came despite the admission that there have been no reported health problems linked to the oven, which can also be used to cook Cantonese duck and even suckling pig. It is interesting to note that the Peking duck dates back more than 600 years, and has been sampled by millions, including high-profile clientele, across Britain alone.

It is not surprising that some alleged that the ban was some kind of "cultural discrimination", as Peking duck represents Chinese culture just like fish and chips does for the British. Yet the latter is enjoying international acceptance regardless of how they are made.

Such "cultural discrimination" unfortunately can extend beyond dead ducks. In France, at about the same time, a woman faced a similar fate. The woman was reportedly denied French citizenship on the grounds that her way of dressing (wearing the burqa) was deemed "radical". It was "incompatible with the essential values of the French community..." said the French Council of State when it handed down the ruling last month.

The judgment was made despite the fact that she was married to a French national, speaks good French and has three children born in France. Her earlier application in 2005 was also rejected for a different reason, namely "insufficient assimilation". Under French laws, a spouse has the right to acquire nationality provided he or she had been married for two years and had a good level of proficiency in French. The application (to acquire French citizenship), though, could still be rejected on grounds of "lack of integration" into French life. According to the authorities, the woman allegedly lived in "total submission" to her husband and male relatives.

The influential newspaper *Le Monde* quoted a female French law professor as saying that it was bizarre to consider excessive submission to men as a reason for not granting citizenship.

Thus, like the case of the Peking duck, as *Le Monde* noted, this is another first — the woman was denied citizenship for reasons that had to do with personal religious practice.

It suggested that the Council of State had gone to the opposite extreme by rejecting the woman's belief and her way of life rather than accommodating them. In fact, it asked: "Is a burqa incompatible with French nationality?" The centuries-old burqa is a cultural garb which cloaks the body except the eyes, which are visible through a narrow slit.

Under the circumstances, does this imply that if the applicant had opted to leave her body largely, or entirely, uncovered, she would be better assured of citizenship? Or could it be another case of "literal-minded bureaucrats" and "inflexible functionaries" arriving at another "depth of silliness?"

However it is argued, both these cases will beg the question: how do you reconcile freedom of culture with freedom of religion and expression, which has been the cornerstone of Western democracy?

To be sure, it is quite definitely a classic case of double standards practised by some of the more parochial "old" European mindsets who impose their values on others. Who can now argue that such stances can be more than just a curse to the emerging brave new world, brokered at the expanding fringes of "new" Europe? If only the Peking duck can speak.

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